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ABSTRACT

In the described early field experience program the field experience is included in the introductory professional education course that is offered during the students' junior year. The field component requires that students spend a minimum of 30 hours actively participating in a public school classroom during the semester. Emphasis is placed on close cooperation between the public school cooperating teacher, the university supervisor, and the field office director. Responsibilities of these participants are clearly delineated, and semester-end evaluation of student performance is arrived at jointly. (JD)

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AN EMERGING EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE PROGRAM

by John A. Williamson

Historically, education courses have been criticized by students as lacking relevance and realism. For years, teacher preparation institutions have vainly attempted to prepare prospective teachers within the sterile confines of the four walls of the college classroom with minimum emphasis upon the practical realities of the public school classroom.

Although few education courses are unscathed by student criticism, the introductory course appears to receive an inordinate amount of criticism which is directly related to its lack of relevance. Research regarding student feedback to introductory education courses indicates that students are disillusioned about the value of the course due in part to its excessive emphasis upon theoretical rhetoric and the absence of actual experience with students in the public school. Paradoxically, it is this introductory course which is generally recognized by those who teach it as the most significant in the development of prospective teachers, because it is here that the student's attitude toward education in general and teaching in particular is most profoundly influenced.

It seems, therefore, imperative that we address the problem of providing more relevance in education courses in general and in the introductory course in particular in an attempt to bridge the ever-widening gap between the theory of the college classroom and the practicality of the public school setting. One method of providing relevance in education courses is to develop a meaningful field experience for students prior to student teaching. The design of an early field

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experience program should place major emphasis upon the role of the student as an active participant engaged in all facets of the teaching process rather than as a passive observer in the public school classroom. Such an experience should be offered early in the professional education sequence of courses and should provide the student with a more realistic self-appraisal of his potential for and commitment to teaching as a profession, as well as provide the university with more effective screening of potential teachers. A description of a recently developed early field experience program follows.

In this early field experience program, the field experience is included in the introductory professional education course which is offered during the students' junior year. In addition to the regular classwork and other requirements associated with the course, the field experience component requires that students spend a minimum of thirty hours actively participating in a public school classroom during the semester.

In this introductory course, the purposes and objectives of the field experience and its relationship to the introductory education course are discussed, after which students complete and return to their instructor a student placement form indicating their subject field and the school district where they prefer to be placed for the field experience. Placement of students in the field experience is restricted to school districts within a forty mile radius of the university and is arranged through the university's office of field experiences. The completed placement forms are sent to the

school districts for approval. The school district indicates not only approval but also when, where, and to whom the student is to report at the assigned public school. The school district retains one copy of the approved form and returns the other three copies to the office of field experiences. A copy is retained in the office of field experiences and one copy each is provided to the student and his/her instructor. Prior to reporting to their assigned schools, the students attend an orientation session at the university where the role of each participant in the field experience, i.e., the student, the instructor, the public school personnel, and the office of field experiences is discussed and all last minute details are clarified. After receiving university approval of their school placement, the students arrange their own schedule for the field experience with their public school cooperating teacher. The students are required to be in the public school classroom a minimum of two hours at any one time.

A representative sample of the roles and responsibilities of each of the participants in the field experience is listed below:

Responsibilities of Student

1. Arranging with the cooperating teacher the times and dates for the field experience.
2. Taking the initiative in seeking help and guidance from the cooperating teacher.
3. Notifying the university instructor of progress made and difficulties encountered in achieving objectives.
4. Becoming acquainted with pupils with whom he/she is working.
5. Acquiring information about the policies and procedures of the school in which he/she is placed and following such policies and procedures as are appropriate to his/her role.

Responsibilities of Cooperating Teacher

1. Preparing the students in his/her class for the university student's arrival.

2. Explaining school policies and procedures to the university student.

3. In participation activities, guiding the student in his/her assigned tasks, and providing the necessary materials and arrangements for completion of the tasks.

4. Providing each student with an understanding of the extent of his/her authority and responsibility.

Responsibilities of University Instructor

1. Preparing the university students for the field experience. This includes reviewing objectives with them, discussing the activities they will be engaged in, and reviewing their behavior in the schools.

2. Communicating with the cooperating teachers and principals in the schools to explain objectives of the early field experience and the needs and capabilities of his/her students.

3. Incorporating the students' experiences into the classroom discussion and activities so students can make the necessary associations between their field experiences and the concepts and techniques being discussed in the university classroom.

4. Taking account of the student's performance in the field in the assignment of a grade for the course.

Responsibilities of the Office of Field Experience

1. Identifying schools, principals, and teachers who are willing to participate in a program of placement each semester.

2. Compiling and processing the field experience requests of university instructors.

3. Providing information on the policies and procedures of the field experience program to public school teachers and administrators, community agencies, university instructors, students, and other interested individuals.

4. Maintaining accurate records on the number and types of requests received, the number of students placed, the type of placements, and similar matters.

5. Preparing instruments, collecting and analyzing data, and preparing reports on various dimensions of the students' and the program's performance.

Students participating in the field experience are required to do the following:

1. Tutor individual students.
2. Check attendance and perform other routine housekeeping duties.
3. Assist the teacher in the preparation of instructional materials for the class which would involve typing and/or use of duplication equipment, A/V materials or film projector.
4. Become familiar with the duties of four of the following by observing each (where permitted) for a minimum of one hour: Counselor, Librarian, Diagnostician, Resource Teacher, and Attendance Officer.

In addition, students are to select a minimum of two of the following activities:

Optional Activities

1. Attend a department, faculty, or PTA meeting.
2. Identify the learning resources available in the school.
3. Observe a teacher-student conference.
4. Assist a member of the professional staff in an extra-curricular activity.
5. Assist the classroom teacher in such activities as hall duty, cafeteria duty, bus duty, etc.
6. Observe other classes such as the following for a minimum of 30 minutes each: 1) shop, 2) home economics, 3) art, 4) physical education, 5) music, and 6) foreign language.

Any successful program requires thorough planning, and this program was no exception. For several months prior to actually implementing the program, numerous meetings were held with public school personnel and university faculty in developing the concept and content of the program as well as the procedures for its implementation.

Objectives of the program and the role and responsibility of each participant in the program were developed and revised according to the needs and desires of both the public schools and the university. The program was then implemented on a pilot basis by four university classes in one of the local schools for one semester. The volunteer university faculty who were to participate in this pilot project met with the public school faculty to explain the program and solicit volunteers. Student assignments were made and the program was implemented. On-site supervision by the university instructor of his students was limited to an initial "howdy" visit with the public school teacher during the first week the university students were in the school, followed by two subsequent visits during the semester.

Student response to the pilot program was very gratifying. As one indication of the success of the program, more than 70 percent of the students voluntarily extended their time in the schools beyond the required thirty hours, several for as many as sixty hours. The following sample of student comments is representative of the positive attitude students had toward the field experience:

"This is a great idea! Why hasn't it been done before?"

"I really got my eyes opened by that group of junior high students."

"I had no idea how out of touch I was with today's adolescent--it was a good experience."

"The best thing that's happened in education courses in a long time."

These student comments along with similarly enthusiastic remarks from public school teachers and university faculty who participated indicate that the pilot project was quite successful and was considered to be very worthwhile.

Evaluation of the program and its participants was conducted by written and oral assessments from each participant in the program, i.e., students, public school teachers, and university faculty. All written assessments were mailed to the director of field experiences and were returned to the public school teacher and university faculty in summary form. In an attempt to assess the student's performance, teachers were asked to confer with the university instructor at the conclusion of the field experience to discuss not only the student's performance but also the student's potential for teaching. In addition, students were asked to maintain a daily diary of the nature of their activities and their reaction to the field experience. This diary along with a log of the date and time they were in school was turned in to the instructor at the end of the field experience. The university instructor assigned a grade for the field experience component on the basis of these evaluation data.

Currently, programs of education are in a state of flux, ranging from the most traditional campus-oriented program to off-campus programs in which students earn university credits entirely in a public school setting. Regardless of the type program, however, most educators today recognize the necessity of some form of early field experience for students. The early field experience program described here is not a panacea, but it does represent an apparently successful attempt to meet one of the most pressing needs of today's students and may serve to enhance teacher education.

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